

I wish it got less awkward. Constantly being befuddled as to who is across from me when I read their names, knowing damn well they know mine, my face, and have the same script everyone has passed around right in their back pocket.

But hell, at least you got lucky enough to have the same name as the last guy, Chris. Makes my job way easier and you get to skip manufacturing any more outrage than you already have.

Clearly though, especially by the look of you? That's where your luck has run out, Ronin.

Do you even know what that word means? I'm sure you do, but do you respect what it stands for?

Maybe...

But i'll look you in the eye, same as so many others have i'm sure, and tell you that you sure as shit do not honour the name, Chris.
Because You are no Ronin.

Hell...you're not much of anything, are you?

"You know, maybe you should be talking to someone else about this stuff."

"Yeah, maybe."

"That sounded noncommittal."

"It absolutely was- now will you hold this thing steady? I'd like to get the hell out of here tonight sometime."

Matthew stood with a practiced poise on the middle rung of a ladder, ratchet in hand as he worked to secure a light fixture above the set for his latest cinematic drivel to rot the brains of whoever'd watch Rise to Glory. On the other side of the ladder, standing a few rungs up was Robert McAlroy, better known as Bert.

Where Matthew was by all accounts a physical specimen, Robert was barely physical. Unassuming at 5'8, a buck fifty with sandy blonde hair and the plainest blue eyes. His face was covered in a sandy scruff and the smell of weed burned Matthew's eyes as it

rolled from his entire form. For all his quirks though, he was always the most dependable of Matthew's friends and the finest student he ever had besides.

"You can't just ignore this kind of stuff though, yo. Thinkin' traffic is after you, beatin' the shit out of your son in law."

"Well, to be fair. He IS sleeping with my daughter. I should be able to punch him whenever I want."

"How are you gonna bitch about this, and deflect when I start down the path of actual solutions?"

"I respond more positively to things being held fucking still now, if you don't mind?" he waited for Bert to shift once more, before wrenching at the last nut. The silence reigned for only a breath before he shattered it "Besides, I go to a shrink with this and they start on that 'cancel your dates' and 'mental health retreat' bullshit."

"I mean, it's worked for me."

"I'm not the running type."

"Fuck You."

"Yeah, I earned that o—Alright, got it."

He leaned away, Bert released his grip on the light and looked scornfully at the older man who had seemingly disregarded the scornful comment and half baked apology alike in favor of admiring his own work. Truly a perfect microcosm for the tragedy that was Matthew Aloysius Knox.

"This is gonna look great."

"Don't you run the episodes in Black and White?"

"Yeah, and?"

"What good is lighting in that setting?"

"Spoken like a cinematic ignoramus."

"I'm just saying dude, this seems extra and like, i'm gonna take a shot in the dark and guess its gotta do with the whole....y'know, mental breakdown? But maybe we don't need to—"

"I do, Robert."

The evenness of the tone caught the younger man off guard near as much as Matthew's gaze which had suddenly come to meet his own, mirth and good humor suddenly muted for something he couldn't quite label....frantic, perhaps? Or something just before? He wondered, if only due to the edibles that had begun to kick in, if an animal knew it was going rabid before it did?

That must be a hopeless conversation with God.

"Alright. Fine...but for real man, you got to—"

"I *got* to get off this ladder, and get out of here. Still got to go cut some bullshit for SCW, drag another Chris over broken glass and gravel."

"They threw him a rematch already?" Bert inquired, waiting until Matthew's gaze averted before reaching up to check his work. His face scrunched, but he shrugged and climbed after him. It'd hold. Probably. If nobody sneezed too hard, or at all.

"Nah, different guy. Calls himself 'The Ronin' even."

"Is he Asian?"

"That's racist."

"No, I think him calling himself a Ronin and not being Asian would be racist."

"That's above my pay grade and so far beside the point -"

"I'm just saying, maybe kick him a little harder in the jaw just in case he is?"

"For you? Anything."

"Well, taking immediate advantage of that....what's up with Joe, yo?"

Matthew paused in his gait briefly, the hitch gone as quick as it appeared. He stopped by the cooler, bending down to retrieve a bottle of water and lingering a moment before twisting the cap off, replying as he did “Nothing, far as I can tell.”

“Really?”

“Why, you notice anything different about him lately?”

“....Really?” It rolled off Bert’s tongue in even parts exasperation and beffudlement.

“Yes, if somethings going on I would like to be aware of it. What kind of friend wouldn’t?”

“Matt, you can’t be serious. The dude literally just tried to murder you a month ago.”

“That?” Matthew took a drink, waving the water bottle dismissively after doing so. He swallowed the drink before continuing “Come on now Robert, that’s just the business. You know that as well as anyone. Your best friend is the same person that wants you dead every other week, worst enemy is your partner and so on.”

“For You.” Robert corrected, raising an accusatory vape pen and waving it at his older compatriot, lifting it to take a hit but pausing to finish before doing so “That’s how the business is For You.”

“And look how successful I tend to be.”

“Leaving out the misery, loneliness, bitterness, impact on your mental health and well being...”

“Can’t torpedo the sell..” He shifted his gaze to the younger man once more after looking over the rest of the set briefly, noting where every prop had been laid out and silently going over a part of the script that seemed contrived. Well, moreso than the rest of it that was.

Anywhere but present, was where he was trying to get to.

“Matt....look, you don’t got to cut me in. Hell If I want the full story I can go talk to Joe, he doesn’t hate me for whatever reason.”

“Probably best not to get involved.”

"I didn't say I was going to. Just that I could...what I will do though is caution you on this man: You put a belt on all your problems."

A soft pat on the shoulder and Robert left it at that, sauntering off while sucking as much vapor as he could from the pen pinched between his thumb and forefinger. Matthew watched him retreat, his words lingering around his head for a moment before a small, mute scoff passed his lips.

"Says you, McAlroy..." he muttered after it before turning on his heel and setting to collect his own effects and head home for the night. Wicked as he was, he still felt entitled to some rest. Especially if he were to fulfill the prescription for the bad medicine that the good Doctor McAlroy had just advised against.

Bind it in Gold...

Let it rest....

Call me in the Morning.

No Lord, No Master...was that the appeal of the name then, Chris? I mean, aside from being known as anything other than 'Chris' that is.

I imagine there isn't a man alive who didn't imagine himself as something of a ronin at some point. Quite the idyllic life to idealize, don't you think? Just you, your sword, and your capabilities with it to drive you through this world.

God, first they saddle you with Chris then they make you....Well, You.

Because see, playing into your fantasy for a moment and standing toe to toe with you, looking you in the eye just like I promised I would? I fit the shoes you imagine for yourself far more than you ever could, Chris. I have no home, and yet I have a reputation. No lord but I hold a keep that flies my own banner.

Far more a Ronin than you in your wildest aspirations. Thankfully for you, I've no interest in the title because while there was a time that I idolized that vision of masculinity and existing that sort of barbaric existence?

I grew out of it.

The shoes I've envisioned and the shoes I fill? You could house generations of your boring, mediocre kin within them Chris and your residency therein would be your

family's best claim to the sort of fleeting greatness people like you have deemed to be Good Enough.

I have a job here, Chris. I'm unwell and there are things I have to do, and people I have to hurt to make myself feel better and you're the body that I stack upon Lawlers to further help me climb over this first wall, this first obstacle here in SCW.

No Master....No Lord...

That's Fine, Chris.

Come Breakdown?

I'll be your God, Your Devil.

And your bloody, pointless End.

'Just Knock'

He'd thought it a half dozen times by now. He glanced down at his watch. It was half past eleven. Surely, she'd kill him if he bothered her. Then again, she'd always been more of a night owl...

He raised his hand, and faltered inches from knuckle meeting oak. A small, defeated sigh left him as he left the flesh meet the cool surface without a sound. A small grimace and he pushed off the door, turning on his heel and walking back toward the elevator. He cautioned a look over his shoulder to that door he was suddenly so terrified to open once more.

Although, to be fair, the last time he opened it he was beat near to death for having done so.

The soft 'ding' brought him from his reverie and cursed him with the familiar contorted portrait of his reflection. He let out a longer, deeper sigh as he leaned back against the wall. Within that little box he found solace in solitude. Alone.

At least that was still familiar.

Still like Before.

He thought of the last time he came to her hat in hand, before dragging her into bloody finale of that Triad business. Of the beating Joe had laid upon him, of the wrath...the hate in his eyes as he carried the beating out.

The hate in his eyes at Keeper of the Flame.

Thin, pale lips pursed as he cautioned to lean closer to the reflection, meeting his own eyes for a moment as he made his ascent. Twice he'd gone to war, real war with Joe and twice the man had left the business in the wake of it. Twice he'd broken his heart, and now a third and final act?

Why not?

He saw hatred in the gaze he met, the one he was one with. Hatred for being forced into this position. He'd given up on perception a long time ago, settled for the reputation he cultivated professionally and personally. He knew the value of love, and how sparingly it ought be handed out.

He knew the wound it created, when the root was ripped from the soil. He knew the villain it made him twice, and would make him inevitably.

And he knew...

He knew he could.

And in some way...

Maybe...

He ou—

DING

The doors separated, splitting the reflection and derailing the treacherous train of thought. He stood still for a moment, taking a deep inhale before stepping out into the hall.

No.

He grasped onto the thought as made his way to his apartment, footsteps echoing off lonely walls as he made his journey unopposed by more than his own thoughts. Ghosts and demons clung to his ankles as his mind built a new mountain of bullshit that surely would topple and crush him beneath the weight of it...

Whatever came though?

He wouldn't be that villain again.

A Villain maybe...

But not The Villain.

Never Again....

Nevermore...

All that's left is how you face it, Chris.

Will you be the Ronin you've proclaimed yourself, or will you flinch like Lawler?
Will you flinch like most of the roster did at Keeper of the Flame?

Or are you the one to derail this train they tried to kill in the cradle?

You know, some have likened me to a disease, Chris. A gloryhound who wanders until he catches on and then he stays until the good times end. Runs at the first sign of resistance to the greatness he has assigned himself....

Do you think you'll be that resistance, Chris?

Have you come to do what fucking my name up on the roster page, hiring some dipshit named Mike, Lawler and all but 7 of the roster couldn't do?

You really don't, do you?

I didn't think so.

Don't despair though, dear Ronin. This won't be a complete loss for you. You'll have me on your resume, and even the most ignorant of....well, You's is bound to learn something from the sort of violence I plan to inflict on you.

And when the dust has settled, and you're left with whatever I leave you with? When you're desperately looking for a villain to assign the blame of this catastrophe for?

I want you to know, there is no one. What I do to you?

I do because with all your might, all your aspirations, all that you think you are and think you can be?

You Can't Stop Me.

I am Raze.

I am Ruin.

I am The Raven.

Your **Bloody....**

Pointless....

End.